

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Noncustodial Parents: What's Next in Wisconsin? Strengthening Families through Work Opportunities

A White Paper Commissioned by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development

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As a leader in child support enforcement, Wisconsin has long led the nation in child support collections. Recent studies show, however, that children need more than financial assistance from their fathers. Children who grow up without close relationships with their fathers are at an increased risk of many negative socioeconomic consequences. Most serious, nearly three in four American children living in single-parent families will experience poverty before they reach age eleven.

With over 24 million U.S. children living in homes without their father, fatherlessness has become one of our society's most troubling trends. This issue is most concerning for the African American community, where six out of ten children presently live in a father-absent household. In response, President Bush and a wide bipartisan group of legislators are supporting passage of legislation to increase funding for state and local fatherhood programs and services. In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has included \$64 million in new fatherhood program funding in its FY 2002 budget request. While there is much consensus that low-income fathers need services, there is less agreement about what those services should be.

The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD) is uniquely positioned to assume a leadership role in noncustodial parent (NCP) reform due to its history and structure. Few, if any, states compare to Wisconsin's prolific series of child support and noncustodial parent innovations. Numerous state agencies offer services to low-income NCPs, such as the Department of Corrections, Veterans Affairs, and the Department of Health and Family Services. DWD, however, has the most extensive set of responsibilities related to this population group. In fact, DWD is one of the only state agencies in the nation that administers child support, welfare reform, and workforce services.

Although DWD oversees a range of fatherhood programs, participation in these programs is relatively low compared to the number of low-income NCPs in the state. It is not, however, insignificant given the relative newness of NCP programs and considered as a percentage of custodial parents participating in all welfare programs.

Why Fathers Matter

When fathers are actively involved, children:

- Do better in school
- Have better social skills
- Are less prone to emotional and disciplinary problems
- Are more likely to become good parents themselves

The poverty rate for children in two-parent families is 8.4%, compared to 31.3% in divorced families, and 64.1% in never married families.

Source: *Restoring Fathers to Families and Communities: Six Steps for Policymakers.*

DWD's Fatherhood Programs

- Children First
- Welfare-to-Work NCP initiatives (statewide and local)
- Workforce Advancement and Attachment
- W-2 Noncustodial Parent Program
- W-2 Food Stamp Employment and Training Program
- Team Parenting Demonstration Partners for Fragile Families Projects

Program (Participant may be in more than one program)	NCP	Custodial Parent	Total in 2000
Children First	4,958	0	4,958
Welfare to Work	1,181	990	2,171
Workforce Attachment and Advancement	157	1,091	1,248
Food Stamp Employment & Training	935	422	1,357

Focus groups in Madison and Milwaukee revealed that even low-income NCPs vary much in financial and emotional contributions to their children. Some saw their children more than once per week, some intermittently, and some not at all. Similarly, the amount paid varied by participant and even varied in each participant's experience. The characteristics of noncustodial parents across the nation mirror much of the pattern represented by the Wisconsin focus group participants.

NONRESIDENT FATHERS IN U.S.	PAY	DON'T PAY	TOTAL
All Incomes	36%	64%	100%
Poor (under 100% FPL)	3%	21%	23%*
Not Poor (above 100% FPL)	33%	43%	76%

Source: NASF, Urban Institute, 1997.

*Rounding error in the numbers.

Most NCPs fall into four broad categories: (1) able to pay, and does; (2) able to pay, but doesn't; (3) unable to pay, but does some; and (4) unable to pay, and doesn't try. The recent recognition that many of the fathers who do not pay are actually unable to pay, meaning they are "dead-broke" rather than "dead-beat," has radically changed the debate. The debate has shifted from how we can make fathers pay to how we can equip fathers to pay.

Without prescribing specific solutions, the paper is built around the premise that enhancing work opportunities for NCPs is a leading contributor to improving their child's emotional and financial well-being. Specifically, the paper addresses three themes to guide the next generation of work-related reforms:

1. Enhance the economic prospects of low-income NCPs through expanded and improved employment and training services.
2. Broaden the scope of the child support program to include services that provide for the emotional and financial well-being of children.
3. Strengthen the formation of two-parent families.

Many states and local governments are hesitant to implement programs targeted to NCPs because of the delicate balancing act between meeting the needs of low-income men without devaluing marriage or, conversely, promoting two-parent families without stigmatizing children and adults who do not live in such families. Yet creative reforms can transcend that debate.

Wisconsin has long been the nation's leader in social policy innovation, and it is natural for it to become one of the early designers configuring noncustodial parent policies and services in the next phase of welfare reform. Such a process requires careful planning, bold experimentation, and timely correction of what does not work and replication of what works well. The purpose of this white paper is to ignite such deliberation.